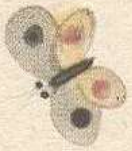
A. Mityayev

# THE ANT AND THE ASTRONAUT

E 16

A. Mityayev



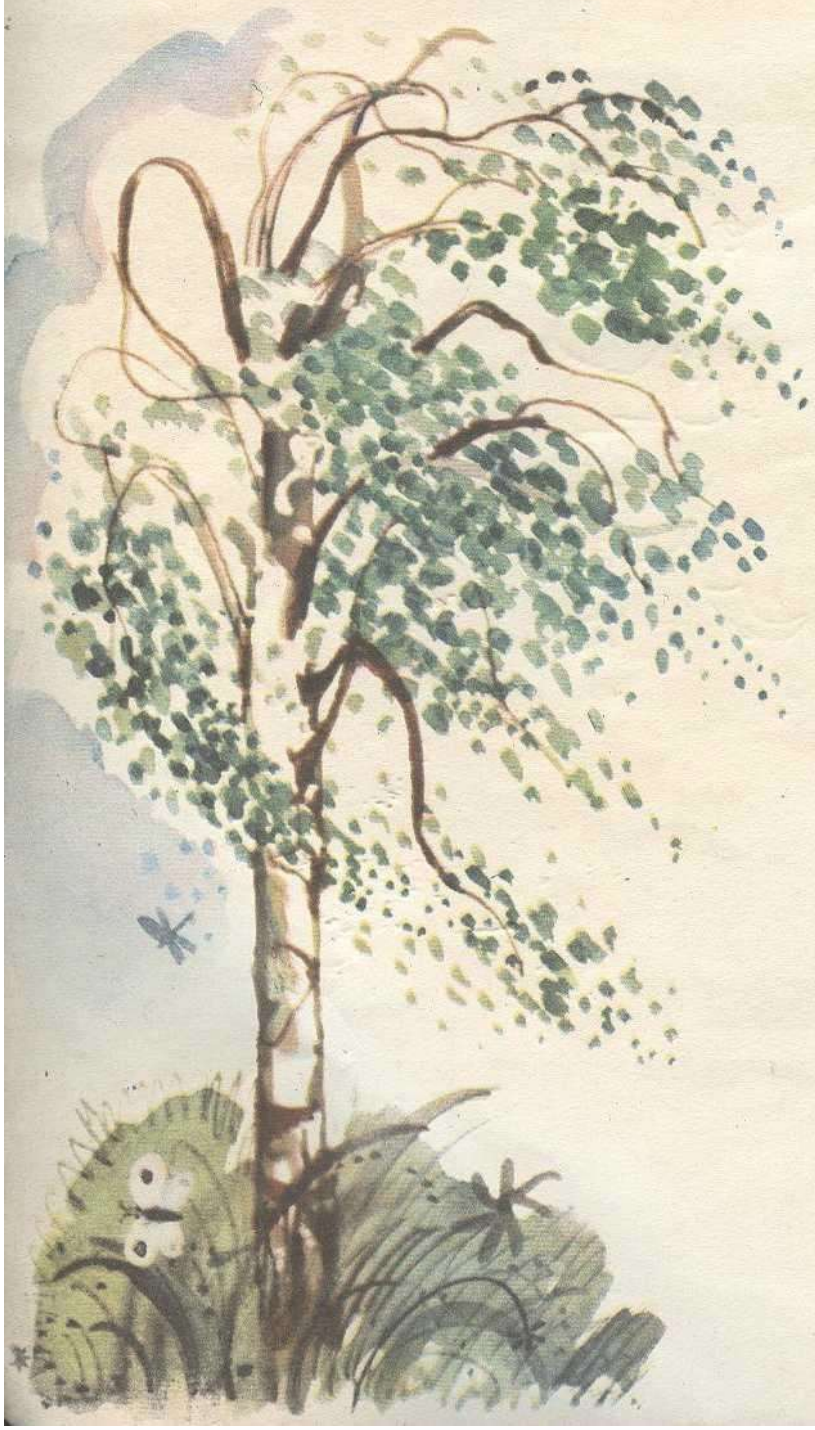
# THE ANT AND THE ASTRONAUT

DRAWINGS BY YURI MOLOKANOV

*Progress Publishers . Moscow*

# THE ANT AND THE ASTRONAUT

Murashka, a young red ant, lived in an ant heap by a wattle fence. On one side of the fence there was a field of pumpkins, on the other—a road. Every day at dawn a milkvan passed along the road. It was a heavy van. When it passed, all the ant heap trembled. Murashka liked sleeping, but how could he sleep when the walls of his home kept shaking as though there were an earthquake! So he would rise before the sun, rub his eyes with his front feet, pull in his belt and go bustling off to work.



He had a very ordinary sort of job: catching caterpillars under the birch-tree and bringing them into the larder.

One morning Murashka had just arrived at the birch-tree, having run all the way as usual, and had sat down to have a little rest. He was sitting there looking up into the air, watching for a green caterpillar swinging from a silken thread. He saw no caterpillars. What he did see was an enormous sun falling straight out of the sky.

Murashka was terribly frightened that the sun would burn him up and wanted to run away. And he would have but, suddenly, he noticed a man in the middle of the sun. Murashka recognised him at once by his space-suit and

helmet. It was an Astronaut with a great orange parachute billowing out above him.

The Astronaut came down, unbuckled the strap of his parachute, took off his helmet and sat down by the birch-tree.

"Hullo, birch-tree!" he said, took a spray of leaves in his hand and kissed it.

Murashka didn't think much of this. Just fancy saying "hullo" to a birch-tree when there was a real live ant to talk to! "It's just that he hasn't noticed me," thought Murashka, twirled his ginger moustache and scrambled up on to the Astronaut's shoe. From the shoe he ran up the side of the Astronaut's leg, then onto his sleeve, then onto his index-finger.

The Astronaut saw Murashka and smiled.

"Good morning, Mr. Ant! Why are you up so early? On business?"

"That's right," answered Murashka shyly. "But please is it true that the Earth is as round as a pumpkin?"

"Quite true," replied the Astronaut. "I've just been a long way off from this Earth of ours and I could see it was round."

"It's all right for us here at the top," said Murashka. "This is where all the people and ants live. But down under on the other side of the Earth there's no one. They all fall off."

"There are ants and people on the other side of the Earth too, Mr. Ant."

"Well I never!" Murashka found this hard to believe.

Just then came the roar of an engine. It was a helicopter coming for the Astronaut.

"Quick, hide, or the draught from the propeller'll blow you away," said the Astronaut and put the Ant down behind a stone.

When the helicopter had flown away and the draught of its passing had died down, Murashka set off as fast as his legs would carry him to tell everyone back at the ant heap about his extraordinary encounter.

## MURASHKA DANCES

As it turned out, all Murashka's brothers and sisters, grandmothers and grandfathers, nephews and nieces and aunts and uncles had seen the Astronaut too. But to sit on his finger and talk to him was an honour that had fallen to the lot of Murashka alone. So, even though he was just a perfectly ordinary red ant, the others began treating him with great respect. As for Murashka himself, he decided that he was really someone now and would do only what he enjoyed doing. Now what he enjoyed doing most was dancing.

"He's dancing for joy," said the other ants sympathetically. "Let him. Anyone else would burst with delight!" They thought that, having had his fling, Murashka would calm down and get back to work.

But Murashka had no intention of getting back to work. He would do nothing else but dance. The ants grew angry with him. That evening they shut the doors of the ant heap and left him outside.

"Aha, that's the sort you are, is it!" yelled Murashka at the closed doors. "All right—if that's the way you want it! I'll make my own ant heap, better'n yours! If I want I'll find a new world of my own and live there all by myself. The Astronaut told me all about it."

"And when you come to think of it," Murashka said to himself, shivering a little in the chill of the night, "Why **shouldn't** I find myself an Earth of my own?"

# MURASHKA'S NEW WORLD

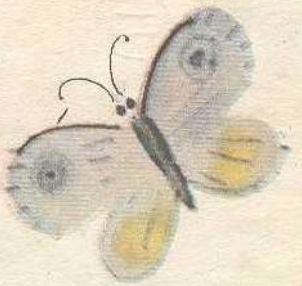
Next morning Murashka went off to choose a world. He liked the look of a particularly large, stripy pumpkin. It was hanging from the wattle fence and looked to Murashka just like a separate world. He climbed up onto the pumpkin and became quite convinced: the yellow stripes on its sides were like fields of wheat, the green stripes like forests and in the little hollow at the very top some rainwater had gathered—and that, he thought, was a sea.

Murashka did a little dance on the shore of the sea, then he had a rest and then ran off to explore. He decided to make a journey round his New World and to see what went on at the bottom of it: perhaps there would be mountains or something else of interest. But the sides of the pumpkin were smooth and slippery, and Murashka tumbled off his world and landed with a bump on the ground.

"How's this?" he thought, rubbing his back. "The Astronaut said that you couldn't fall off the Earth."

Again Murashka clambered up onto the pumpkin. He sat on the edge of the sea, took his head in his front paws and began to think how to set about building his new ant heap.

He would have thought how to do this, but suddenly the pumpkin gave a shudder and began to hum. "Oho!" thought Murashka, scared but rather thrilled. "That must be an earthquake. My world is an absolutely real one."



But it was not an earthquake. It was a boy who happened to be passing the pumpkin bed and had scored a direct hit on the pumpkin with a stone from his catapult.

## THEY MEET AGAIN

Day followed day. Murashka wandered about the pumpkin field, climbed up the fence, sometimes even went as far as the birch-tree, but always in secret so as not to be seen by his relations. The Pumpkin-World bored him now, but pride forbade him to return to the ant heap. In fact, Murashka had become a tramp with no home. He no longer danced; his gaiety was all gone. Instead he was full of spite and resentment. So when he caught sight of a man sitting under the birch-tree he made straight for him thinking, "I'll bite him. That'll make him jump."

The ant charged as through a tangle of grasses getting angrier every moment. "I'll bite his nose!" he threatened.

Most unfairly, Murashka attacked the man from behind: he ran up his white shirt as far as the collar, crept from the collar onto his neck, from his neck to his cheek and from his cheek to his nose. Then just as he had arched himself to get in a real, sharp bite he found himself between the man's thumb and forefinger.

"An old friend!" Murashka heard a voice exclaim. "What are you taking a walk over my nose for?"

Murashka was paralysed with shame: it was that very same Astronaut who had landed there the other morning.

Red ant that he was, Murashka turned bright scarlet.

"G-good morning!" he stammered. "Y-you again?"

"I wanted to have another look at this glade," replied the Astronaut. "And at the birch-tree, and at you, Mr. Ant. It's not something you do every day—coming down to Earth again. I'll never forget the joy of it."

"And the Earth really is like a pumpkin?" asked Murashka, remembering his troubles with the Pumpkin-World.

"Just like I told you. Like a pumpkin, or a ball, or a balloon. Like a blue balloon flying through space."

"And no one falls off?"

"No one."

"Then why did I fall off my world?" asked Murashka, and his voice trembled.

When he heard Murashka's whole story, the Astronaut burst out laughing.

"Ah, Friend Ant, this Earth of ours is something marvellous! If you've nothing better to do, I'll tell you some stories."

"Fire ahead," said Murashka rather sadly. "I've nothing better to do—just at the moment."

He settled himself comfortably on a white button and prepared to listen.

## THE FIRST STORY

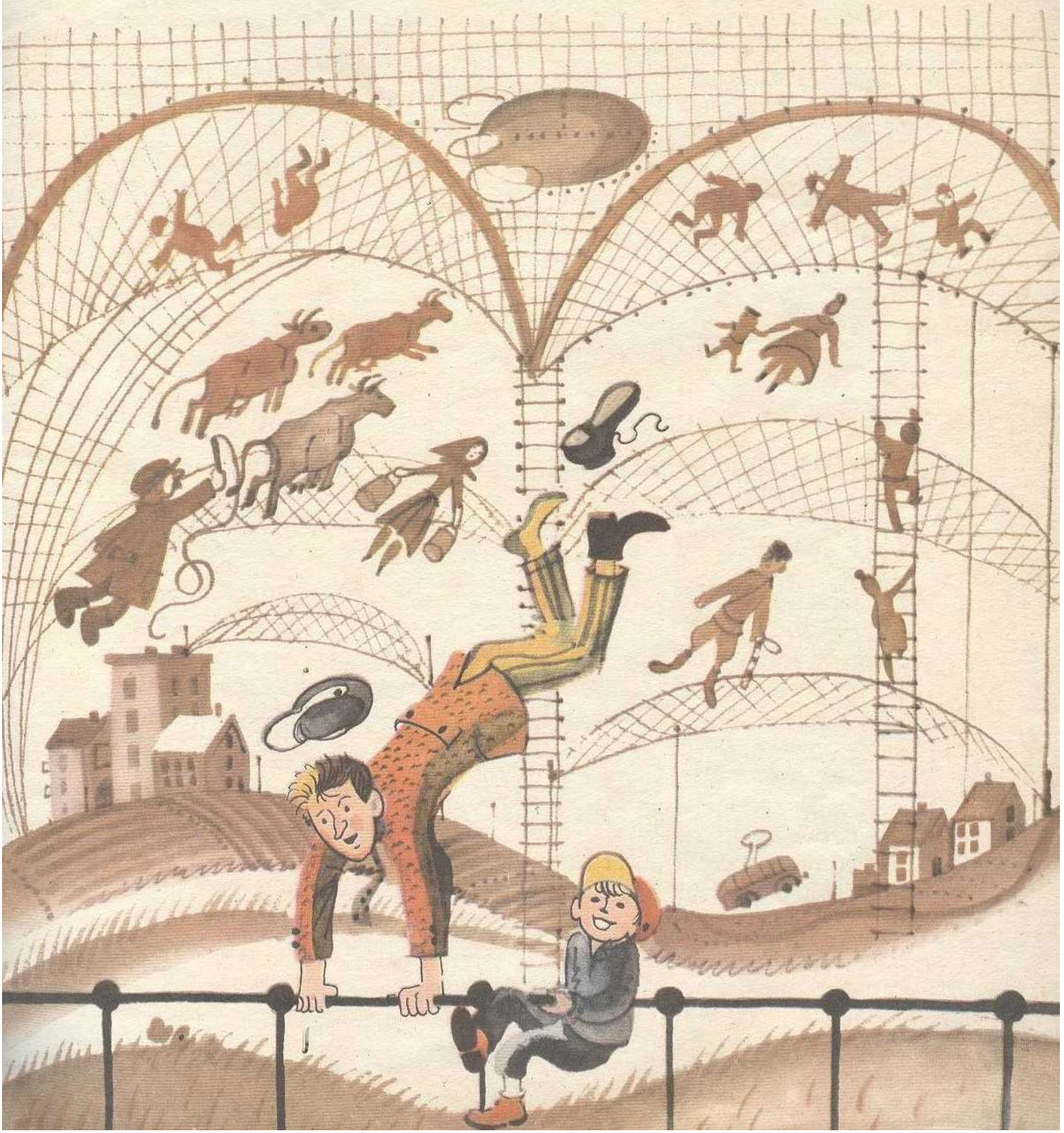
There was once a time when everything on the Earth used to fall off. Things on the bottom fell down and, strange as it may seem, things at the top fell up. They just flew away, like birds. Dogs flew or fell away if they were not securely attached to their kennels. Ripe apples, sweet as honey, fell and flew from the apple-trees. The apples had to be gathered before they were ripe and were so sour they weren't worth eating—ugh!

Special railings were made for people to hang onto as they went about the streets.

In order to avoid accidents for those who forgot to hold on they put up nets on high poles above all the towns and villages. Absent-minded people flew up or fell off into the nets. Then they got down to Earth again by ladder.

And as for what went on in the houses! Chairs and tables, if they were not firmly nailed to the floor, fell onto the ceiling.

As you see, Murashka, it was even worse for the people living on the Earth in those days than it is now for you on your pumpkin.



And people said to the Earth: "We know you are kind, really. Please make it so that we should stop tumbling off you."

"All right," answered the Earth. "I shall exert a sort of pull over all the things and people on me just as if I were a magnet and you were all made of metal."

The Earth exerted a pull, but such a hard one that people could not raise their feet from the ground; the birds stuck to the roofs and could not so much as flap their wings; the tops of the trees bent down to the ground.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" The people cried. "You're pulling too hard. A bit more gently, please..."

The Earth began to exert a more gentle pull, just as it does now. And nobody ever fell off it again.

## THE SECOND STORY

But still things weren't quite right on the Earth. And I'll tell you why, Murashka. The Earth was hanging there in space, just like your pumpkin. And the Sun always lit it up from the same side. So on one side it was always day-time, and on the other it was always night.

On the sunny side there were pumpkins, lemons, strawberries, birds were singing, butterflies fluttering, hares and rabbits jumping and playing.

On the dark side nothing would grow, not even dandelions. And no one lived there but owls. Sometimes cats would come—cats can see in the dark. But they would very soon go back to their nice warm places in the sun.

When people wanted to go to sleep they would draw heavy curtains across the windows—there's no getting to sleep if the light's streaming into your eyes. And some crossed over to the night side of the Earth to sleep. And of course there they often slept in and were late—some for the factory, some for school. And a lot of them got awful bumps on the head in the darkness.

So the people again asked the Earth: "Kind Mother Earth, could you not spin for us?"

And the Earth went spinning round and round in front of the Sun like a little girl showing off a new dress to her Mummy. The Sun shone first on one side of her, then on the other.

Where we are now, Murashka, it is day-time! But on the other side it's night-time and everyone is fast asleep: people and ants.

## THE THIRD STORY

Then, Murashka, you told me that a stone landed on your pumpkin and nearly killed you. Many stones used to fall on our Earth, too. There are whole clouds of stones, sometimes, flying about in outer space.

Once our Earth told the people: "I need a covering so that the stones shouldn't make my sides so sore. I've done two things for you. Now you do something for me, please. Think up some way of protecting me."

First the glass-blowers tried. They made the Earth a covering of glass. But no sooner was it all ready than there was a great

clattering of broken glass. A meteorite had made a hole in the glass. All the window menders, every man Jack of them, set to work to renew the glass. But as fast as they mended it in one place, splinters would fly in the next.

The people were discouraged. They couldn't very well make the Earth an iron covering. There would be no seeing the Sun through iron.

"Let me try," said a man who sold balloons, and he began to let the compressed air out of all his cisterns. There was a long queue of people waiting for balloons, but he paid no attention to them until he had wrapped a blanket of air all round the Earth.

Everybody liked the blanket of air: the Sun showed through and the meteorites got stuck in it and burned up like matches.

The balloon-seller loved long scientific words. He called the blanket of air in which he had wrapped the Earth "the atmosphere". And after that he went back to his old job of selling balloons to the children.

## THE ONE AND ONLY

"What should I do now?" asked Murashka. "They won't let me into the ant heap, they lock me out. Of course a pumpkin is not an Earth really. In the autumn they'll carry the pumpkin off to the village and cook it and fry the seeds in a frying-pan for the children to nibble in the winter... All very well for the children. They've got fur coats and felt boots and warm caps. But as for me, I'll get frozen stiff in winter, I'll die..."

Murashka gave a little sob and wiped away a tear with his little red paw.

"Look up, little Ant," said the Astronaut quietly.

A green caterpillar was hanging from a bough of the birch-tree on a silver thread.

"I think that's your chance to put things right," whispered the Astronaut. "And just remember, there's plenty of people and plenty of ants, but only one Earth. Well, good-bye now—and good hunting!"

The Astronaut went striding off to his car. And Murashka rushed to the place towards which the caterpillar was lowering itself.

When Murashka dragged his captive to the ant heap, no one asked him anything; the ants realised that he had already been sufficiently punished for his boasting. But Murashka himself, having delivered his caterpillar to the larder, said:

"There's plenty of people and there's plenty of ants—but there's only one Earth!"

And again the ants said nothing, for they had known that all along.

Translated from the Russian by Avril Pyman

А. МИТЯЕВ

**МУРАВЕЙ И КОСМОНАВТ**

*На английском языке*

English translation © Progress Publishers, 1973.

*Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics*

М $\frac{70802\text{-}709}{014(01)\text{-}79}$ без объявл.

4803010102